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**‘You kind of don’t want them in the room’: Tensions in the Discourse  
of Inclusion and Exclusion for Students Displaying Challenging  
Behaviour in an English Secondary School**

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## **‘You kind of don’t want them in the room’: Tensions in the Discourse of Inclusion and Exclusion for Students Displaying Challenging Behaviour in an English Secondary School**

Internationally and within England, there has been increasing focus upon perceived behaviour problems within schools. This study, which took place within a mainstream English secondary school, considered the interplay of the competing notions of exclusion and inclusion for children displaying challenging behaviour. The study used a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data gathered on school referrals (temporary exclusions from lessons) and interviews with staff and students. This approach allowed both a consideration of trends within referrals and an analysis of how students displaying challenging behaviour are constructed within the discourse of the school. Findings showed that some groups were disproportionately affected by referrals. Within interviews, students and staff oscillated between individualising and contextualising the cause of challenging behaviour both blaming the student and seeing them as a victim of circumstance at the same time. Teachers indicated a greater willingness to change their practice and use a contextual approach to understanding pupils’ behaviour when they felt they had been given a reason from the student’s home life or background to do so. Recommendations are made for future research in the previously under-researched area of referrals and implications for practice are discussed to make schools more inclusive of students with challenging behaviour.

Keywords: school exclusion; student behaviour; inclusion discourse

### **Introduction**

From acts of serious violence to swinging on chairs, international media, governments and people working within education have become preoccupied in recent years with behaviour within classrooms (Graham 2017; Taylor 2017; Richardson and BBC News 2017). The UK government has published its own reports about endemic ‘low-level disruption in classrooms’ in English classrooms (Department for Education [DfE] and Morgan 2015) and promised a raft of measures to solve the problem including no-notice behaviour inspections of schools (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted] 2017).

Teachers themselves seem equally concerned by behaviour within their classrooms, citing it as one of the main reasons for leaving the profession (DfE and Morgan 2015).

Schools have continued to ‘tackle’ behaviour and this in many cases leads to exclusions whereby students are either temporarily (fixed-term exclusion, FTE) or permanently (permanent exclusion, PE) prevented from attending school. In 2015/16, 6,685 primary, secondary or special school students received a PE and 339,360 received a FTE with persistent disruptive behaviour the most common reason given, accounting for 34.6% of FTEs (DfE and Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2017). There were significant demographic differences in exclusions, for example, boys are four times as likely to receive a PE and three times as likely to have a FTE and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) account for half of all PE and FTE (DfE and ONS 2017). Children in receipt of Pupil Premium (PP) are four times more likely to receive a PE and FTE (PP status is a government measure of disadvantage for either a child who is or has recently been in care or a child in receipt of free school meals [DfE and Education Funding Agency (EFA) 2017] which has several advantages as a measure of relative poverty, as discussed in Bolliver et al. 2015). As pressure has been put on schools to reduce PEs and FTEs (Gazeley et al. 2015), some English schools have also adopted internal exclusionary systems such as internal exclusion rooms (Barker et al. 2010), managed moves (Gazeley et al. 2013) or wider exclusionary disciplinary systems (Gazeley et al. 2015). National data is not gathered within England regarding the use of internal exclusionary practices (Gazeley et al. 2013) although Orsati and Causton-Theoharis (2013) suggest that they may be increasing the likelihood of challenging behaviour in schools.

At the same time, a competing discourse has continued within education internationally; that of exclusion’s antonym *inclusion* (Gidlund 2017). Following the

Labour Government's commitment to creating inclusive schools (Dyson et al. 2004), the concept of inclusion continues to be prevalent within England. There is great debate around defining inclusion (Norwich 2014) but at its heart inclusion is often used to describe both including everyone in classrooms (Visser and Stokes 2003) and designing equal opportunities for all within education (Norwich 2014). The current study, carried out across the 2015/16 academic year, sought to consider the understanding of the concepts of challenging behaviour, exclusion and inclusion within a mainstream secondary school located in the South West of England.

### **'Challenging' behaviour**

The focus of this paper is upon students who display what is known interchangeably in research and policy as 'challenging behaviour' (Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2013), 'behavioural, emotional and social difficulties' (BESD) (Burton and Goodman 2011; Pillay et al. 2013), 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' (EBD) (Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes 2013) or 'social and emotional behavioural difficulties' (SEBD) (Mowat 2010). The number of terms indicate the confusion in both policy and research relating to these students (indeed the DfE [2016a] recently ceased using the term BESD now using social, emotional and mental health [SEMH], not intended as a direct replacement).

Johnson-Harris and Mundschenk (2014) describe the behaviours of these students as disrupting lessons or sitting disengaged from learning. Visser and Stokes (2003) argue there are many 'local variables' which determine what is a behavioural difficulty so appropriate behaviour can be seen as being constructed within the context (Waterhouse 2004; Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2013). This is why this paper will adopt Graham and Harwood's (2011) suggestion of 'students displaying challenging

behaviour’ as the extent to which something is ‘challenging’ relies upon the context and perceptions of those involved.

### **Exclusionary Practices**

Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes (2013) suggest that EBD pupils are considered the most challenging group to manage within mainstream education. It has become increasingly common for students with challenging behaviour to be removed from lessons in what is sometimes known as a ‘referral’ or removed from lessons into an internal-exclusion room (Barker et al. 2010; Gillies and Robinson 2012). ‘Referrals’ lead to students being required by their teacher to leave a lesson following challenging behaviour. Students are usually permitted to return to lessons later in the day without receiving a FTE or PE.

Orsati and Causton-Theoharis (2013) argue that exclusionary practices, such as referrals, for students with challenging behaviour increase the likelihood of their behaviours continuing as they have missed teaching. In the search of literature for this paper, no academic research was found which focussed upon referrals, indicating that there is little if any published national data or current research into their use.

### **Inclusion and Inclusive Practices**

The discourse of inclusion runs contrary to the idea of excluding students from schools and lessons. Inclusion is difficult to define with government policies and documents often using the word ambiguously or without definition e.g. the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (DfE and Department of Health [DoH]). Researchers and practitioners have, therefore, been left to define the concept themselves resulting in some describing inclusion as elusive (Mowat 2010) and a cliché (Sikes et al. 2007). This paper will adopt the wide-ranging definition of Waitoller and Kozleski (2013,p.35):

Inclusive education is a continuous struggle towards (a) the redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational opportunities, (b) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and (c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to *represent themselves* in the decision making processes.

We use this definition to help our focus to move beyond concepts, rhetoric or philosophical values to the practical, practice-based implementation of inclusion within the school and its classrooms.

Several features have been identified as contributing to an inclusive school practice; school leadership creating an inclusive culture (Ainscow and Sandhill 2010; Toson et al. 2013); an inclusive school ethos (Gazeley et al. 2015); considering students' needs at the planning stage of lessons (Conderman and Hedin 2014; Johnson-Harris and Mundschenk 2014); and teacher trial and error (Goodman and Burton 2010). These approaches suggest that changing the context (be that school ethos/environment or lesson content/teaching approach) can make schools more inclusive. Sikes et al. (2007) suggest that inclusion is often not viewed positively for those who present challenging behaviour. Gazeley et al. (2015), however, directly link inclusive practices to reducing FTEs and contrastingly Rose et al. (2018) found that a group of schools working collaboratively to reduce FTEs succeeded in developing more inclusive systems. There is, therefore, clearly a relationship between inclusive practice and exclusion.

### **Contextualising vs. Individualising**

As initial teacher training (ITT) within England has become increasingly complex within recent years (Whiting et al. 2018), many teachers are left without formal training for how to use inclusive approaches to support students with challenging behaviour (DfE 2016c) with much of their behaviour management advice based in anecdotal rather than research evidence (Armstrong 2018). Gazeley and Dunne (2013),

found that student teachers' learning about exclusion was unplanned rather than a formal part of their training. Baker (2005) identified a relationship between teacher confidence and feelings of self-efficacy and willingness to adapt practice for children displaying challenging behaviour. Perhaps as a result of limited training and confidence in their abilities, many teachers do not hold favourable views of students with challenging behaviour (e.g. Mowat 2010). Carlile (2011) suggests that students are often thought of as a 'problem' without consideration given to the structures or failings which led to this (Gillborn 2015). Orsati and Causton-Theoharis (2013) directly link this idea of the student-as-problem with exclusionary practices as teachers then seek to remove the 'problem' from their classrooms. They also identify another trend; students with challenging behaviour are often discussed through comparison with an 'other' who does not display challenging behaviour (similar to Waterhouse [2004] who found that teachers tended to construct certain students as *others*). Gazeley et al. (2013) note that this individualising of behaviour, alongside an unwillingness for informal exclusionary trends to be considered at school level, leads to a tendency to see children in isolation rather than taking a systemic approach to managing the overrepresentation of certain groups (e.g. PP and SEN) within exclusionary processes.

This 'child as problem' approach represents a model which situates the cause of challenging behaviour within the individual. Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes (2013) suggest that many of the difficulties in forming a definition of 'EBD' stem from competing understandings of where the difficulties come from: a medical model or a context-based social model. The medical model depicts the person as 'a deficit from the norm' and seeks treatment of the individual (Manago et al. 2017). Norwich (2014) argues that inclusive education represents a move away from a medical to a social model of disability. Seen from the social-model perspective, difficulty is made



problematic because of a society which fails to adapt to a wide range of differing needs (Manago et al. 2017). It is therefore the environment and context which needs to change to accommodate the need, not the individual themselves.

Adopting medical-model and social-model labels for understanding causation within the context of challenging behaviour is problematic, however, as it could imply that there is a ‘medical’ (such as a physical disability or illness - tensions in use of disability labels are explored in Norwich [2014]) or ‘social’ (such as parental or family deficit [an approach critiqued in Gillies and Robinson 2012; Gazeley 2012; Ellis et al. 2016; Thomson et al. 2016]) ‘need’ underlying the challenging behaviour. We will therefore adopt the terms ‘individualising’ model (where the cause of the challenging behaviour lies within the individual) and ‘contextualising’ model (where the cause of the challenging behaviour lies within the context or environment). Anning et al.’s (2006) work on competing models sheds further light on this individualising/contextualising model tension suggesting that it is possible for people to have complex models of understanding where two models may co-exist, leading to a difference between theoretical explanations and how people act in reality.

Whilst the above research reflects an individualising approach to understanding challenging behaviour, others have identified contextual factors, such as relationships, which contribute to either creating or minimising challenging behaviour. Davidson et al. (2010) found that positive classroom behaviours (such as being helpful to the teacher) led to more positive relationships with teachers and peers which in turn was associated with greater confidence in academic skills. Koomen and Jellesma (2015) found that students’ reported negative relationships with teachers were associated with greater levels of behavioural difficulty. Sellman (2009) found that students with challenging behaviour felt that the quality of their relationship with staff was more important than

policies or ‘tools’ for supporting their behaviour and Gazeley et al. (2013) found that staff and students identified relationships as key in reducing exclusions. The importance of relationships in shaping behaviour implies the importance of context interacting with individuals for students displaying challenging behaviour in schools relating back to Anning’s (2006) concept of models co-existing or interacting with one another.

The tensions between individualising and contextualising of causation for challenging behaviour within previous research leads to the question of how this impacts upon exclusionary and inclusive practice; is it possible for schools to be ‘inclusive’ and still exclude pupils from lessons?

## **The Study**

The current study took place over the 2015/16 academic year in a mainstream secondary school in the south west of England. Nationally, external exclusions showed significant imbalances between demographic groups (DfE and ONS 2017), with no research found which focussed upon referrals and exploring whether they experienced similar demographic differences. Whilst other studies had considered the construction of individuals with challenging behaviour and their context, no studies were found which simultaneously considered individualising and contextualising of challenging behaviour and the consequences of this on exclusionary/inclusive practice. As a result of this and the review of literature above, this study identified three research questions:

- 1) What are the trends in informal exclusionary practice within the context of this study?
- 2) How is challenging behaviour individualised and/or contextualised within the talk of stakeholders?
- 3) What are the reported consequences of individualising or contextualising challenging behaviour in terms of inclusive and exclusive practices?

## **Method**

A mixed methods research design was adopted incorporating quantitative research using school data and qualitative interviews with a mixture of stakeholders.

### *Quantitative Data*

The quantitative data sample consisted of 2515 records of referrals from September 1<sup>st</sup> 2015 to May 27<sup>th</sup> 2016. Each record contained; student name, gender, SEN status, PP status (in this sample only one child was in care and all remaining PP children were in receipt of free school meals), day of week, lesson number and the name of the referring teacher. The population from which the sample was drawn was the whole school which was made up of: 82% White British; 50.5% girls; 49.5% boys; 52% PP; and 12% SEN.

### *Quantitative Analysis*

We aimed to determine whether various characteristics of referred pupils differed from that of the school population as a whole as national data for exclusions had shown significant differences between groups (DfE and ONS 2017). Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were carried out to establish whether the proportion of referred students who were SEN, PP or male or female differed significantly from the proportion of pupils with these characteristics in the whole school population. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were also used to assess referral distribution across days of the week and times of the day. Following a theme emerging in the qualitative data where speakers discussed difficulties faced by members of staff who had just joined the school, be they experienced teachers or newly qualified teachers, a further test was run to establish whether referral rates of new joiners to the school and teachers who had been employed for two years or more differed significantly from what would otherwise be expected. In

addition, tests of association were used to test for a significant association between gender and PP or SEN amongst those referred.

### *Qualitative Data*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 members of staff and 13 students at the school. Interviews began with a series of scenarios describing various pupil behaviours. Each scenario was based on behaviours that had led to a referral e.g. one depicted a student swearing at a teacher and ripping a poster off the wall. Another showed a student unresponsive with their head on the desk. These scenarios were designed to encompass a wide range of behaviours recorded within the school and were adapted for simplicity of language, including adding pictures, to make them more accessible to students.

Interviews then moved on to semi-structured questioning focussing upon real experiences of ‘challenging behaviour.’ Finally, staff and students were shown descriptions of a range of teaching strategies and asked to discuss their relationship to challenging behaviour. Questions were adapted for staff and students but followed the same themes and used similar resources. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim.

Ethical issues of this research were approved by the authors’ institutional ethical procedures. These included ensuring non-identifiability of participants, informed consent, and the right to refuse participation or withdraw data.

### *Qualitative Analysis*

Thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases, was chosen to analyse the data from interviews as it provided a method of analysis which could be ‘applied across a range of theoretical’ approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006, 78). All interview

transcripts were read once without coding. A second reading generated a set of initial codes, which were refined after a third reading of transcripts and then developed into four themes **as discussed in the qualitative results.**

### **Quantitative Results**

Results (see Table 1) showed there were more referrals earlier in the week with the highest number on Monday and lowest on Friday. There were more referrals later in the day until 'Family Time' (the last lesson of each day where students spent 30 minutes with their tutor engaging in tasks which tended to be more pastoral than academic in nature) when the referrals drop again. There was no significant difference in referral rates amongst boys and girls but there were proportionally more referrals than might have been expected for PP students and SEN students. Finally, teachers who were new to the school were responsible for more referrals than other teachers.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

With national statistics for PE showing a significant gender imbalance (DfE and ONS 2017), chi-square tests of association were used to explore gender differences within groups (given that no difference was found between boys and girls above). The results of the chi-square tests of association (see Table 2) show that boys with SEN status were more likely to be referred than might have been expected but that this difference was not found for PP status students.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

### **Qualitative Results**

Whilst the quantitative elements of the study suggested that contextual, demographic factors, which are not under a student's control, were associated with their referrals, the

qualitative data included several examples of tensions between factors which both individualised and contextualised challenging behaviours. Four main themes were identified: the construction of the student, the construction of the context, inherent tensions in discourse and resolution of tensions.

### ***The Construction of the Student***

Staff and students used language suggesting an inherent difference or problem within the student was responsible for their challenging behaviour. There was a tendency to use the language of criminality and law enforcement (thus implying a criminal/victim divide); *'he done criminal damage' (Student)* with one teacher calling two students *'culprits'*. There was a wide range of additional descriptors of students with challenging behaviour **used by both staff and students**: *'hyper', 'cheeky', 'naughty', 'classroom clown', 'silly', 'disturbed', 'drama queen', 'difficult', 'bubbly', 'disruptive', 'immature', 'unmanageable problem.'* **For staff**, the use of labels locating problems within the child often coincided with non-child-centred language being used; *'they don't deserve to be in the group.'* **Both staff and students** blamed *'deliberate'* actions by the student for challenging behaviour which, for staff, often coincided with feelings of their own powerlessness: *'No matter what you do...it really does hinge on their response unfortunately.'* These labels and the idea of deliberate actions imply something within the child, be it their personality, ability or development, is responsible for their behaviour suggesting an individualising of behaviour rather than a consideration of systemic issues (Gillborn 2015).

**Staff and students** also reflected upon the impact that behaviour had upon 'others.' This developed in two different approaches. In the first, **which was expressed by both staff and students**, 'other' students were presented as the 'victims' of

challenging behaviour. This reflects Waterhouse (2004) who found there is a use of an ‘other’ to define and construct behaviour. Here, staff and students used the perceived needs of ‘other’ children to support exclusionary practices. **In the second approach, expressed by staff**, the ‘other’ students were an audience encouraging challenging behaviour, with staff actively trying to *‘take away the audience’* which implied a contextual role of others in creating challenging behaviour.

Staff also referenced explanations which were located outside of the school such as gender and ethnicity, culture or race: *‘he didn’t have a very high opinion of women culturally.’* Staff often constructed ‘backstories’ to explain students’ behaviour (e.g. *‘something going on in the family home’*) indicating that the source of the explanation for challenging behaviour was at home and implied a lack of or poor-quality parenting with *‘no boundaries.’* **Both Gillies and Robinson (2012) and Gazeley (2012) are critical of this tendency of teaching staff and professionals to blame parents for behaviour.** Students, however, were more likely to locate the explanation for the challenging behaviour within the individual; wanting *‘attention’* or wanting *‘to annoy everyone’*. The construction of the student highlights tensions in the data between individualising and contextualising approaches to understanding the cause of challenging behaviour.

### ***Construction of the Context***

Another feature of the data which contextualised the causes of challenging behaviour, was the role of teaching and learning. Nearly all **staff and students** chose planning or differentiation as the most important strategy for supporting students with challenging behaviour: *‘if my lessons aren’t well planned then behaviour can be very poor.’* **This reflects** suggestions from Conderman and Hedin (2014) and Johnson-Harris and Mundschenk (2014). **Both staff and students**, also linked challenging behaviour to work

that students could not access or found boring; *'they might be messing about because they don't understand it'* (Teacher). Explaining why a student might be shouting out in a lesson, one student said, *'To make the lessons a bit more interesting.'*

Teachers also seemed to identify themselves as a contextual factor. All staff referenced the idea that either they themselves or other staff had the expertise necessary to prevent challenging behaviour: *'I wouldn't have expected it [the scenario] to get to that point... I would have intervened earlier.'* Staff linked inexperience of working at the specific school setting, not necessarily inexperience in teaching, to being unable to prevent challenging behaviour: *'I think the first year here is very challenging for staff...because children look more to push boundaries.'* This was mirrored by the quantitative data which showed a significantly higher referral rate for staff who had joined the school in the previous year. In contrast to this experience and expertise, other teachers lacked confidence reflecting the findings of Baker (2005) which connected teacher self-efficacy with feelings of being able to manage challenging behaviour.

**These teachers** saw themselves as at fault for not being able to manage challenging behaviour: *'I've stopped myself referring people before, because I realise it was my own fault.'* Staff did not refer to feeling any pressure to reduce referrals. However, nonetheless, half of the staff participants referred to feeling that a referral was a failure on their part: *'I don't like referring anyone... you sort of go "Oh God, I wish this wasn't happening."'*

### ***Inherent Tensions in Discourse***

It is clear that there was a divide within the discourse of participants when it came to individualising and contextualising challenging behaviour. What was interesting, however, is that three quarters of staff participants oscillated between the two positions



both blaming the individual *and* contextual factors, sometimes within the space a few sentences: *'You know clearly something's up...but then if they're just going to sit there...you kind of don't want them in the room.'* Most student participants and a few staff participants consistently expressed one viewpoint; for students this was mostly that the student was to blame although one student did feel that behaviour may be because of *'a problem at home.'*

However, three quarters of staff participants switched between positions during their interviews. This reflects Anning et al.'s (2006) suggestion that people can hold complex models or are able to hold two competing models at the same time. For example, **one member of staff** suggested that behaviour in scenarios was down to *'certain people's personalities...it's just in their nature isn't it sometimes?'* and yet later suggested that the same behaviours could be explained by difficult home lives and listed strategies including meeting the student at the door and good planning, which apparently could prevent this challenging behaviour regardless of their previous view that the issues were inherent within the child.

Whilst identifying problems outside of the control of the child as explanations for challenging behaviour, **members of staff** still expressed preference for punitive, exclusionary responses for these students. One teacher identified that *'the ones who show all the behaviour ... have been flagged up with the safeguarding team'* (responsible for overseeing child protection concerns) and yet later argued that these same students did *'not dislike going into'* the internal isolation room enough and that this was *'a bit of a weakness, so... make it less desirable to go there.'* Another teacher discussed sending a child outside of the room for a chat as an effective tool for managing the behaviour displayed in the scenarios because it *'embarrasses them in front of their peers'* and yet elsewhere in their interview identifies *'trauma'* or

*'something terrible has happened the night before'* as possible reasons for challenging behaviour in the scenarios.

It seems difficult to imagine that these speakers intended to imply that children who needed safeguarding or who had experienced trauma needed to be further punished or embarrassed and yet these are the oppositional opinions which any staff were able to hold concurrently. As suggested by Anning et al. (2006), it appears one person is able to hold to oppositional ideas *at the same time*.

### ***Resolving Tensions***

There were some elements of the qualitative data which offered a potential resolution for these tensions: relationships and knowledge of students. Relationships were considered by most **staff and students** to be one of the single biggest factors that influence the likelihood of experiencing challenging behaviour (reflecting the findings of Davidson et al. [2010], Gazeley et al. [2013] and Koomen and Jellesma [2015]).

Students valued teachers getting to know them: *'I really like it in a teacher... because I feel like they actually do care.'* Staff also suggested that they were more likely to respond in a less punitive way when they understood the contextual factors: *'if she came out with stuff I'd be the same hardline but as soon as I knew she was looked after I was very different.'* Staff lamented that they sometimes couldn't know the full picture behind a student *'I know it's impossible to know everything – but...knowing that piece of information you'd have been completely different.'* It appears that once staff had a reason to contextualise challenging behaviour, they were then willing to adapt the context through use more inclusive practice but without this they were more likely to individualise challenging behaviour and follow a more exclusionary approach. For example, one teacher suggested that their response *'would probably be less tolerant if*

*there wasn't an obvious reason'. Having a knowledge of the contextual factors which may be responsible for a student displaying challenging behaviour linked to moving away from an exclusionary approach to responding to challenging behaviour within the talk of participants.*

### ***Key findings***

The qualitative data in this study demonstrated dichotomous understandings and constructions of students with challenging behaviour with participants both contextualising and individualising challenging behaviour at the same time. However, instead of models of individualising and contextualising challenging behaviour coexisting (Anning et al. 2006), here participants discussed making an active choice to change how they positioned causal, be that individual or contextual, factors for behaviour when given a reason to.

### **Discussion**

Several trends emerged from the quantitative data suggesting that contextual factors external to the student were associated with referrals. Firstly, timing was important with more referrals taking place towards the beginning of the week, and with referrals increasing throughout the day until 'family time' when they were relatively few. These phenomena were not discussed within the literature and would benefit from further research. Secondly, certain demographic groupings were correlated with referral rates. For example, PP status students were much more likely to be referred than non-PP students. Teachers in the interviews seemed to equate **deprivation and poverty (which can to some extent be linked with PP status [Bolliver et al. 2015])** with difficult and traumatic home lives. This is **similar to the findings of Thomson et al. (2016) and Ellis**

et al. (2016) with student teachers. However, Gillies and Robinson (2012) are critical of this trend of blaming ‘family deficit’ for behaviours. Gazeley (2012) found that professionals often made assumptions about quality of parenting that were both gendered and class-based, and that parents felt blamed which affected their interaction with the process of exclusions. Future work could explore parents’ and carers’ views of the relationship between home life home life and behaviour in school and how the experience of ‘family deficit’ being blamed for the behaviour of their children impacts their engagement within the exclusionary processes for their children.

The final relevant external factor from the quantitative data was who was teaching the student. Teachers who were new to the school setting within the last year were more likely to refer than other teachers. It could be that new teachers were simply more likely to be newly qualified and less likely than ‘experienced’ teachers to have developed their own strategies to prevent challenging behaviour. Secondly, it was also possible that relationships mentioned above (and by Mowat 2010; and Carlile 2011) were not as strong with new teachers and this made challenging behaviour more likely. Further research would benefit from exploring the use of exclusionary practices and feelings of self-efficacy in their ability to manage challenging behaviour (Baker 2005) by newly qualified teachers and by qualified teachers who are new to their setting.

There were also many contradictions and tensions in how causal factors for challenging behaviour were constructed within the talk of stakeholders. In some ways, speakers contextualised challenging behaviour blaming factors outside of the student’s control such as other students, lesson content, home life or culture (which relates to Waterhouse’s [2004] suggestion that behaviour is constructed in the context). However, *at the same time* many speakers also clearly reflected what had been found in other studies; that stakeholders individualised challenging behaviour seeing the student as a

problem (Mowat 2010; Carlile 2011; Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2013; Gillborn 2015). Speakers used descriptors locating the cause of challenging behaviour with the student's attitude, personality or deliberate choices. Much of the talk around students with challenging behaviour framed them in terms of 'victimhood' or 'criminality.' They framed 'other' students as the 'victims' having their learning disrupted. However, there was conversely an element of victimhood attributed to students with challenging behaviour, reflecting the discussion in Barker et al. (2010), with descriptions of home lives characterised by violence, trauma, confrontation and abuse. It was particularly interesting that many staff oscillated between these positions within their interviews both contextualising and individualising challenging behaviour *at the same time*. Knowledge of a student was identified by speakers as a deciding factor in whether they individualised challenging behaviour and as a result used a punitive, exclusionary practices or whether they contextualised challenging behaviour and were therefore willing to adopt a more inclusive teaching practice.

## Conclusions

This paper adds to current research into exclusion, inclusion and behaviour by highlighting the importance of exploring the currently under-researched area of referrals. Persistent disruptive behaviour is initially addressed in many schools with internal exclusionary systems such as referrals. Such behaviour is given as the most common reason for FTEs (DfE and ONS 2017) which themselves often lead on to PE. It is important, therefore, that referrals are not ignored when considering systemic inequalities in exclusionary processes within schools. In this study, where conclusions are limited to the context of only one school, the referral data largely reflected disproportionate findings within national exclusion data. Government statistics suggest

that just one day of absence from school can affect a child's life chances (DfE and Gibb 2016) and missed lessons may make future challenging behaviour more likely (Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2013). No research, however, seems to have focussed upon the long-term impact of students repeatedly missing learning as a result of referrals. Equally, unlike for FTEs and PEs, there is currently no requirement for schools in the UK to report on their use of referrals, as internal exclusionary processes are not externally monitored (Gazeley et al. 2015). As a result, no one knows whether, as was the case in this study, certain groups are disproportionately affected by referrals nationally.

The study contributes to a growing understanding of how the causes of challenging behaviour are contextualised and individualised within education and shows that stakeholders see students displaying challenging behaviour as *both* responsible for their actions and victims of circumstance. These findings differ from previous research, not in identifying that the relationship between both competing understandings is complex (Morago et al. 2017) or that competing understandings can co-exist (Anning et al. 2006), but that teachers were able to develop greater understanding of and empathy for students. This meant that they could reject punitive exclusionary approaches to challenging behaviour, when they gained knowledge of certain contextual factors and were therefore willing to adopt inclusive classroom practices. This was similar to the findings of Gazeley (2012) who identified that the role and experiences of certain professionals made them more likely to be able to move away from deficit or individualising models to a contextualising model. Here, however, there was greater variance with the same members of staff able to express empathy for and understanding of certain students when they felt they had sufficient reason to but not for others. Further consideration should be given to the experiences, within Initial Teacher

Training or elsewhere, which develop this variance, and to the relationship between teacher ability to gain understanding of students and the disproportionate representation of certain groups within exclusions. It is possible that conditions within schools where teachers were able to gain better knowledge of their students displaying challenging behaviour in order to understand and empathise with them, could lead to more inclusive teaching practice. Ultimately, this could reduce the use of exclusionary practices (from referrals to PE) which can have such long-reaching and negative consequences for the lives of the students affected.

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Table 1 – Results of chi-square goodness-of-fit tests

Variable	Chi-square statistic	P-value
Day of the week (Monday [412], Tuesday [406], Wednesday [343], Thursday [361], Friday [297])	$X^2 (4, N=1819) = 24.76$	<b>P&lt;.001***</b>
Lesson number in school day (1 [172], 2 [268], 3 [371], 4 [479], 5 [506], Family Time [23])	$X^2 (5, N=1819) = 374.90$	<b>P&lt;.001***</b>
Gender	$X^2 (1, N=2515) = 1.08$	P=.298

<i>(male [1271], female [1244])</i>		
PP status <i>(PP [1719] / non-PP [796])</i>	$X^2 (1, N=2515) = 269.35$	<b>P&lt;.001***</b>
SEN status <i>(SEN [445], non-SEN [2070])</i>	$X^2 (1, N=2515) = 77.21$	<b>P&lt;.001***</b>
New teacher status <i>(new [1654], other [861])</i>	$X^2 (1, N=2515) = 2067.02$	<b>P&lt;.001***</b>

Table 2 – Results of chi-square tests of association amongst pupils referred

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Chi-square statistic</b>	<b>P-value</b>	<b>More likely to be referred than would expect</b>
Gender / PP status <i>(Female: Non-PP [386], PP [858], Male: Non-PP [410], PP [861])</i>	$X^2 (1, N=2515) = 0.508$	P=.508	N/A
Gender / SEN <i>(Female: Non-SEN [1045], SEN [199], Male: Non-SEN [1025], SEN [246])</i>	$X^2 (1, N=2515) = 4.868$	<b>P=.027*</b>	Boys with SEN